

This is Us: 3. The wise, the foolish, and the evil
Proverbs 9:8-9; Proverbs 27:12; Luke 15:20-24
September 23, 2018
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There is nothing that brings greater joy to life than relationships if they are going right and nothing that brings greater pain when they are not. This is us. Last Sunday, I talked about identifying what we can and cannot control in a relationship and how we often cross someone else's property line in an attempt to control what we cannot control. After the service, several of you told me that your neighbor needed to hear the message. Let me just say that some of your neighbors were here and they said the same thing about you!

We need relationships. God designed us to be his hands and feet, to support, comfort, and encourage each other. Jesus said, "Wherever two or three have gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." We need and reach out for relationships, but we often pick people not like us to trust. This morning, I want to talk about nice, responsible people in relationships, which, of course, is all of us. But nice, responsible people have trouble in relationships because we assume everyone else is like us. What I mean is when you get feedback – let's say you just stepped on my toe – you think others will respond like you would. You stepped on my toe, and I said, "You just stepped on my toe. It hurts when you do that." And you would say, "Steve, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that. Thank you for telling me. I'll be more careful next time." And whether it's at work or school or home, we assume that's how other people will respond. They listen to feedback and change. But unfortunately, not everyone is like you, and the Bible tells us there are three very different kinds of people. We have to deal with these different types in different ways, because not everyone is as loving and takes feedback as well as you do.

So what are the three types of people? The wise – these are the people who listen, the foolish – they don't listen, and the evil – they may not be evil people but their way of behaving is evil.

1. The wise. They are not necessarily the smartest. This is not about intelligence. Being wise, according to the Bible, is when the truth to them, when the truth shows up, they adjust themselves to the truth. If someone says, "You're a horse," you might ignore that, but if five people say that to you, you realize either it is time to buy a saddle or stop being a horse. Being wise takes humility to listen and hear the truth in what you are hearing. Not being defensive, but adjust yourself to the truth.

From Proverbs: **Correct the wise, and they will love you.** The wise person is grateful for feedback. They will love you for it. And what happens the next time an issues arises? **Teach the wise and they will become wiser.** They become wiser. You want to go directly to them and have a conversation and best of all the relationship grows. In a workplace, you want wise people. You want to invest in them. In a family, sometimes it's a young child who is wise. You can reason with them and they listen and you can see positive change.

2. The foolish. This could be the smartest person in the room, the most experience, brilliant in every way but one. When you give this person feedback, the fool doesn't accept it but rejects it and adjusts the feedback to fit them. In other words: "What do you mean, I don't listen. Where did you get that idea? I'm a great listener. The problem is you. You never told me that." Or, your employer provides feedback on your performance and you respond: "If you gave me more responsibility or if you would change my job..." When you talk to the foolish, their response is deflect, defensive, blame, because they are not listening.

From Proverbs: **Do not correct the [foolish], or they will hate you.** Confront the wise and they love you for it. Confront the fool and they will hate you for it. Because you are talking to them as if talking will work. It won't, because they are not listening. But we keep trying (or nagging) as if doing the same thing will get a different result. Talking doesn't work, instead move to limits and consequences. Shift the conversation: "I have a problem. Whenever I talk to you about your anger, it doesn't help. And I can't do this anymore. All I can control is me, so unless there is a change, I will have to remove myself from the conversation or if you get angry like you do sometimes, I will spend the night somewhere else. I can't control you, but I can control me." Limits and consequences. The fool is not a bad person but a fool causes pain. The foolish will not listen until there is a consequence.

3. The evil. Someone engaged in evil behavior. Their desire is to inflict pain. It's the bully. Love is to seek the good. Evil is to seek harm. Proverbs tells us, **Prudent people see evil and hide.** With an evil person, you can't talk, they won't listen to limits and consequences, so you go into protection mode. When someone has destruction as their intent, I'm done. I'll only talk to you through my attorney, or I'll only talk to you after you get help.

Wise, foolish, evil – Here's the deal. All of us have all three of these inside us. There are days you tell me I really messed up, and I say, "thank you for telling me so I can change." There are days you give me feedback, and it pushes a button in me and I get defensive and can't hear it. There are days when I want to hurt you – so mad I want to key your car. All three are inside us and inside those with whom we have relationships. This is us.

And maybe you are here today and you are hurting because of your interactions with someone. Maybe you have carried this pain with you for a long time. Hear this: God knows your story, because it's God's story. People that God loved and gave life responded to God with anger or they turned away from God. And according to scripture, what we learn from God is to have an ongoing relationship, we must have forgiveness.

What God did was let go. God decided to forgive – the world. That does not mean everyone is forgiven, because to appropriate that forgiveness, to restore the relationships it takes two. We must respond. God says, I forgive you. Just look at the cross, I paid the price of whatever broke our relationships. But to restore the relationships means waking up, owning what happened, confessing (the word confess means "to agree with"), and turning.

Jesus told a story about this in Luke 15. A son said to his father, "I no longer want anything to do with you." And it broke the father's heart (his son wouldn't listen) so he let his son go. And at first, the son had the time of his life – no limits, no consequences – but after the son had used up all of the resources his father had given him. Once he hit bottom. Once he suffered the consequences of his behavior, he saw himself for the first time. He acknowledged what he had done. And he made the hardest decision of his life, he turned around – he repented and turned toward his father. And Jesus said, **While the son was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. His father ran to him, hugged him, and kissed him.** God is waiting to say each of us: Welcome home. Come to the party.

If you are in a relationships and the other person won't listen, you can forgive – you can let go – "I want you back, I want to work this out," but if they never acknowledge the issues, if they never confess and change, there can be no reconciliation. Forgiveness is free. It is a gift. Trust is earned. Remember this: No matter where you've been or what you've done, God has forgiven. God wants you to come to the party. The decision is yours.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of September 23, 2018

Weekly Prayer: God, help us see the times when we have not acted according to your will. We ask for forgiveness for times when we have been foolish or acted with hurtful intent. Thank you that through Christ's death on the cross you showed the greatness of your love for us. With the help of your Holy Spirit, make us more like you. Amen.

Monday, September 24

Scripture: Proverbs 9:8-9

Don't correct the impudent, or they will hate you; correct the wise, and they will love you. Teach the wise, and they will become wiser; inform the righteous, and their learning will increase.

Observation: This section of the book of Proverbs contrasts Wisdom and Folly. In these verses, we are given advice concerning the reaction that teaching will provoke in others. Those who are wise and righteous respond to instruction and correction by growing wiser. But the "impudent" hate those who attempt to correct and admonish them. The word, impudent, means "not showing respect." We might say such persons react defensively or deflect such teaching as nonsense. However, the wise accept the feedback they are given and grow from it.

Application: How does a wise person respond differently to feedback than a fool? How have you experienced these two ways of receiving feedback? When have you offered advice and it has been accepted and when has it been ignored as if never heard? Are we as wise as we think we are?

Prayer: God, grant me the humility that I need to be able to listen to the people around me. Help me to see myself as you see me, a person in the process of becoming more than I am. Amen.

Tuesday, September 25

Scripture: Proverbs 27:12

Prudent people see evil and hide; the simpleminded go right to it and get punished.

Observation: The Hebrew word that has been translated as "simpleminded" denotes those who are easily persuaded and inclined to evil. The same Hebrew word is used in Genesis 3:1 to describe the serpent who tempted Eve in the Garden. In other words, when the wise see danger they stay away, but the "simpleminded" have evil intent and "go right to it."

Application: Some people have ill-will toward others and do not care if others get hurt. Have you encountered such persons? How have you responded? The hard truth is that all of us have had moments when we harbored ill-will toward others. You may not have acted on what you were feeling, because wisdom (or your better judgment) kept you from danger.

Prayer: Lord, be the strength and the refuge that I need when I am faced with someone whose anger and intent is meant for harm. And when I am tempted to harbor ill-will toward anyone, let your love be the healing force within me. Amen.

Wednesday, September 26

Scripture: Matthew 18:21-22; James 5:16

Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Should I forgive as many as seven times?" Jesus said, "Not just seven times, but rather as many as seventy-seven times.

For this reason, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous person is powerful in what it can achieve.

Observation: How many times must we forgive? It is hard to forgive. Our human nature wants to hold on to the pain, wanting our pain to somehow condemn those who hurt us. Jesus offered his disciples a number. Jesus, how many times must we forgive? Seven times? Seventy-seven times? Maybe Jesus' response is meant to pose this question: how many times do you need to forgive before you start feeling it?

Application: What should forgiveness look like? What steps do you need to take to forgive those that have harmed you? Have you forgiven yourself for your mistakes? What part does confession play in forgiveness?

Prayer: Lord, help me to forgive as you have already forgiven me. Set me free from the pain, whether it be the result of my actions or the words and actions of others. I want to follow you. I want to feel your fullness and grace. Amen.

Thursday, September 27

Scripture: Luke 15:11-19

Jesus said, "A certain man had two sons. The younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the inheritance.' Then the father divided his estate between them. Soon afterward, the younger son gathered everything together and took a trip to a land far away. There, he wasted his wealth through extravagant living. "When he had used up his resources, a severe food shortage arose in that country and he began to be in need. He hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. He longed to eat his fill from what the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have more than enough food, but I'm starving to death! I will get up and go to my father, and say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son. Take me on as one of your hired hands."'

Observation: Some of the younger son's hurry in Jesus' extended parable about sin and God's forgiveness and grace might be understandable. According to the law at that time, his older brother would inherit two-thirds of the estate, and the leadership role in family matters. But the younger son created his own problems by poor choices. He demanded his inheritance while his father was still alive, and foolishly blew it on high living. No doubt many heads nodded when Jesus said it was only "when he came to his senses" that he headed for home.

Application: We tend to think the father's love showed only when the son came home. But people in the culture of Jesus' day found the story at this point quite incredible. Fathers just don't behave like that; he should (they think) have beaten him, or thrown him out. There is a depth of mystery already built into the story before the son even leaves home." In what ways does God's choice to allow us moral freedom help you understand God's desire for a relationship built on love, not control?

Prayer: Lord God, at times I get frustrated or impatient with your ways, and feel like “running away from home.” Help me to keep my senses about me at those times, to use my God-given freedom well and lovingly. Amen.

Friday, September 28

Scripture: Luke 15:20-24

So he got up and went to his father. “While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. His father ran to him, hugged him, and kissed him. Then his son said, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Quickly, bring out the best robe and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet! Fetch the fattened calf and slaughter it. We must celebrate with feasting because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life! He was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

Observation: The dejected younger son trudging home had wasted his inheritance. He managed to get out the words, “I no longer deserve to be called your son.” But, like the tax collector in Luke 18:9-14 who “wouldn’t even lift his eyes,” he found the father’s heart full of mercy, and not worried about “deserving.” The father ran to him, hugged and kissed him. Then he called to his servants, and gave orders to start a big celebration for his son’s return.

Application: Imagine how this story would impact your heart if Jesus had said, “The father grudgingly said, ‘Fine—you can come home. But hear me, young man—you’re on probation, big time. One step out of line and I’ll send you back to the swine.’” What was Jesus’ message about God’s attitude toward us at all times, whether we’ve messed up or been on our best behavior? How deeply have you internalized Jesus’ image of what God is really like?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I want to be a part of the big story you are writing in human lives, wrapped up in my heavenly father’s big, strong embrace. Keep leading me to my place in your story. Amen.

Saturday, September 29

Scripture: Luke 15:25-32

"Now his older son was in the field. Coming in from the field, he approached the house and heard music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what was going on. The servant replied, ‘Your brother has arrived, and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he received his son back safe and sound.’ Then the older son was furious and didn’t want to enter in, but his father came out and begged him. He answered his father, ‘Look, I’ve served you all these years, and I never disobeyed your instruction. Yet you’ve never given me as much as a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours returned, after gobbling up your estate on prostitutes, you slaughtered the fattened calf for him.’ Then his father said, ‘Son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found.’"

Observation: It made the perfect “happy ending,” but Jesus’ story didn’t end when the younger son was home and the party had begun. In this story, Jesus spoke to people who “were grumbling, saying, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them’” (Luke 15:2-3). So we meet

the older brother, angry about his younger sibling's return and the party going on. The father clearly loved the older brother, too, and begged him to join in the joy at his brother's return.

Application: Jesus left the older son's story open-ended. We hear the father pleading, but Jesus didn't say what the older brother did. It was as though Jesus was telling us that we decide how the story ends. Sadly, most of the "older brothers" in Jesus' day turned away rather than welcome prodigals home. As you enjoy the "party" of faith, how do you respond to the father's appeal to welcome the lost who've come home?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I want to "enter in" to the joy of your kingdom, and celebrate what you are doing in other lives. Move me from a "tit for tat" existence into the exuberant, abundant life of your kingdom. Amen.